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Private Wars

U.S. Citizens Plunge Into Latins' Conflicts For Peace and Profit

Advocates of Right and Left Provide Aid and Comfort And Sometimes Fighters

Latest Idea: Adopt-a-Contra

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Ever since Davy Crockett and his Tennessee Volunteers fought in Mexican territory at the Alamo, American civilians have been proudly poking their noses into foreign wars. U.S. adventurers fought Franco in the Spanish Civil War. Irish and Jewish Americans for years have helped finance wars against the English and the Arabs.

Today, this time-honored civilian involvement reaches new heights in Central American jungles and sun-drenched Caribbean islands. Thanks partly to the emotions that President Reagan has aroused over his enthusiasm for right-wing "freedom fighters" there, Americans are forging vast fund-raising and military-support networks and turning Latin American conflicts into a kind of do-it-yourself war for Americans of all political stripes.

Hollywood personalities, retired Pentagon officials and other notables have made headlines with their financial involvement or outspoken views and Main Street Americans—truck drivers, doctors, homemakers, clergymen and others—are working on behalf of some cause in the region.

Varied Motives

Some want to fight communism. Some want peace. Some want profit. Some are simply weekend cowboys who thrill at training and fighting side by side with foreign armies. And whether from the left, the right or neither side, Americans involved in Latin American conflicts share a conviction that in these small, nearby lands, a few civilians can shape international events.

"I felt important in Honduras," says James Adair, a 36-year-old Houston adventurer who recently spent six weeks there accompanying right-wing guerrillas on forays into Nicaragua. "It was exciting."

The proximity of Latin American combat zones—Houston is closer to San Salvador than to New York—makes the turmoil not only more pressing to Americans but also more accessible. U.S. citizens from the left and the right occasionally almost bump into each other there: Christian war protesters, for instance, sometimes inspect battle sites in northern Nicaragua hours after receiving reports of American mercenaries fighting in the area.

"We see more of these pseudo-military ventures popping up every day," says Leonard Lindheim, a U.S. Customs agent in New Orleans. "When you've got Third World revolutions just a three-hour plane trip away, these types of activities are bound to increase."

Civilian involvement was certain to increase when Mr. Reagan, enraging some and inspiring others, called the Nicaraguan rebels "the moral equivalent of our founding fathers." In the past year, private groups backing the Contras have raised some \$12 million on their own.

And on Wednesday, the U.S. House of Representatives voted \$27 million in non-military aid for the rebels. As Congress debated, more than 1,000 demonstrators were arrested after occupying federal buildings and congressional offices from Chapel Hill, N.C., to San Francisco. "Those who protested weren't the average radical," says Jim Sweeney, a Maryknoll missionary who helped coordinate the national civil-disobedience and protest campaign. "Congress now has to face average people, many who are ministers and nuns and have access to a continuous public forum—the church."

Reagan Criticized

Some critics charge that the Reagan administration has encouraged right-wing military adventurers by looking the other way when they violate U.S. laws. "Private groups are now constantly breaking our neutrality laws in Central America," says Rep. Ted Weiss, a Democrat from New York, "and we're overlooking it." A Justice Department spokesman counters, "There's a lot of holes in the Neutrality Act. . . . You can't prosecute these guys."

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ville, Ariz., markets repackaged copies of the Central Intelligence Agency's controversial covert-operations manual with an advertisement exhorting conservatives to irk "your liberal friends by having a copy of this manual on your coffee table." Well-heeled liberals are beckoned to Central America to "study Spanish while you learn about the Nicaraguan revolution firsthand." Since 1979, more than 100,000 Americans have visited the war-torn region—and have created a minor industry in doing so.

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The Adventurers

Some gung-ho Americans trek to Latin America mostly for adventure. The 2,500-member Civilian Military Assistance group of Decatur, Ala., provides military training and combat gear and even fights side by side with rebel soldiers.

"The CMA is just a bunch of good ol' boys from Alabama not given to deep political examination," says Mr. Adair, the one-time Honduran adviser, who writes about the group's exploits for an obscure military magazine under such headlines as "Sandinista Turkey Shoot." "Why do we have to wrap everything in the flag?" Mr. Adair asks. "Why can't we just say we do it for adventure? We had a good time."

The danger only adds to the CMA's appeal. The group's membership swelled after two CMA men were killed in a helicopter crash in Nicaragua last fall. Sam Hall, a 48-year-old former Olympic diver from Dayton, Ohio, proudly grimaces as he opens his shirt to show off a pink-rimmed scar on his abdomen and produces a graphic photo of himself sewing up his own wound, inflicted by a Sandinista bayonet in Nicaraguan jungles. On a recent visit to the U.S., Mr. Hall said he operates a CMA-backed commando school and has launched several "training missions" into Nicaragua. Although the group's leaders officially discourage members from entering combat in Nicaragua, the CMA's founder, Tom Posey, says, "I admit it—we all want to go over" into Nicaragua.

Unwelcome Visitors

The Honduran and Costa Rican governments haven't exactly welcomed CMA's involvement, however. In March, 14 CMA men were thrown out of Honduras after the government learned that they planned to assault a Nicaraguan military encampment; five other members remain jailed in Costa Rica on weapons charges. Mr. Hall can't even count on moral support from his brother, U.S. Rep. Tony Hall of Ohio, who has voted against aiding the Contras.

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